Love isn't all you need

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SUSANNE ENDERWITZ: *Liebe als Beruf. Al-ʿAbbās ibn al-Aḥnaf und das Ġazal.* Stuttgart 1995: *Franz Steiner Verlag.* X, 250 S. (Beiruter Texte und Studien, 55).

Medieval Arabic theories of love consider gazing at a person an inevitable way of falling in love. Thus, it seems appropriate that SUSANNE ENDERWITZ' book about the Arabic love poetry *(ġazal)* of al-ʿAbbās b. Aḥnaf attracts the gaze. The bright red cover shows two female musicians dancing – the reproduction of a fresco from Samarra – and reveals just the first part of the title: Love as profession ("Liebe als Beruf"). But as so often in life, the second gaze leads the reader to the inescapable denouement that this is not a work about singing slave girls *(qiyān)* or even prostitutes. It is a book about a man's love poetry, marketed like a man's sport car – with women as decoration.

The ʿAbbāsid poet al-ʿAbbās b. al-Aḥnaf, who was born around 750/751 in Khorasan or Basra and died between 803 and 810 at Basra or Baghdad, is considered the best author of the Arabic *ġazal* and among its last important practioners. In her PhD thesis (FU Berlin 1990), ENDERWITZ approaches al-ʿAbbās's *ġazal* by analyzing his social position as an author of chaste love poetry within the social history of his time. According to the medieval Arabo-Islamic tradition (p. 36), the historical person al-ʿAbbās was characterized as a member of a fraternity interested in fine arts *(fatā)*, while his *ġazal* was understood as the love poetry of an elegant charmer *(ẓarīf)*. ENDERWITZ' working assumption is that there is an interdependency between the two male roles *fatā* and *ẓarīf* and the concept of love in al-ʿAbbās's poems.

The book is divided into four sections: 1) a survey of the development of the literary genre *ġazal* (p. 1–29: "Zur Entwicklung des Ġazal"), 2) a description of the social concepts *futūwa* and *ẓarf* (p. 31–65: "Fatā und Ẓarīf"), 3) the poet's biography (p. 67–122: "Leben und Werk"), and 4) an interpretation of al-ʿAbbās's love poetry in relation to both the medieval Arabic and the medieval European tradition of *amour courtois* (p. 123–222: "Dichtung und Denken"). This fourth section is the main part of ENDERWITZ' work. The book also contains an afterword (p. 223f), a bibliography (p. 225–238), a subject index and two indices of proper names (p. 239–246), and English and Arabic summaries of ENDERWITZ' thesis (p. 247–250). Unfortunately, this extensive study of al-ʿAbbās's *ġazal* does not provide any indices of his poems nor a concordance of the two critical editions of his

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dīwān (Cairo 1954, edited by ʿĀtika al-Ḫazraǧī, and Beirut 1965, edited by Karīm al-Bustānī). Although both editions are currently cited in scholarly works, Enderwitz refers to al-Ḫazrayī's edition only (p. 110f).

I would like to discuss this ambitious and probing study of al-ʿAbbās's *ġazal* within the context of three issues that are important to the field of Arabic studies. The first issue is historiographical: Enderwitz employs aesthetic texts, al-ʿAbbās's love poems, as documents for social history. The second is a question of cultural anthropology: Enderwitz claims structural similarities between the concepts of love in the Arabic *ġazal*, Troubadour lyric, and *Minnesang*. She indirectly advocates the so-called Arabist theory that the sudden emergence of Provençal poetry around 1100 was caused by the influence of Andalusian Arabic poetry. Finally, this study raises a problem from a feminist point of view: Enderwitz excludes any questions about the asymmetries of gender, although she takes a man's poems explicitly addressed to women as documents of male roles.

The historiographical issue is the most important, since it determines Enderwitz' sources and qualifies the validity of her conclusions. It concerns, on the one hand, the different kinds of textual evidence which are available for the historian and literary critic of early ʿAbbāsid love poetry and, on the other hand, the relationship of this evidence to the poet's life and the social and political history of his time. Extant Arabic sources from the second half of the eighth century are rather scarce, although there are archaeological remains and Byzantine and Pahlavi sources to supplement and clarify the available Arabic texts.

Enderwitz approaches her sources by making three assumptions.

She considers the *Kitāb al-aġānī* by Abū 'l-Faraǧ al-Iṣfahānī (died 967) a biographical source for the second half of the eighth century. With regard to al-ʿAbbās's biography (p. 69f), Enderwitz does not differentiate between the *Kitāb al-aġānī* and a biographical dictionary *(ṭabaqāt)* like the *Wafayāt al-aʿyān* by Ibn Ḫallikān (died 1282). But the *Kitāb al-aġānī* is an *adab*-anthology which presents anecdotes *(aḫbār)* as explications of poems. Although the *Kitāb al-aġānī* was not written as a historical source, it is still often used as such.

Enderwitz construes *fatā* and *ẓarīf* as male roles in early ʿAbbāsid society from treatises of the tenth and eleventh centuries – the *Kitāb al-muwaššā* by Ibn al-Waššā' (died 937) and the *Kitāb al-ǧamāhir fi maʿrifat al-ǧawāhir* by al-Bīrūnī (died 1048). Thus, she implicitly assumes that male roles did not change for two centuries.

She distinguishes between al-ʿAbbās as a historical person and his *persona* (p. 11, 65, and 125–127), which she translates "dichterisch[es] Ich" (p. 127). This heuristic distinction – "Dichtung und Biographie decken sich nicht" (p. 65) – can be called idealistic because his *persona* is the better person: "die *persona* Ibn al-Aḥnafs erhebt Anspruch auf Originalität *und* Authentizität" (p. 126). In spite of her distinction between the poet's historical person and his *persona*, Enderwitz nevertheless understands al-ʿAbbās's poetry as an expression of the poet's personal convictions. Therefore, she can propose that the "Dichter [*i. e.* al-ʿAbbās] verschwindet nicht hinter seinem Werk, sondern tritt durch es gerade erst hervor" (p. 9). This conception of the poet's personal voice as expressed through his poems

is comparable to the position taken by other literary critics in the field of Arabic studies, such as EWALD WAGNER (*Grundzüge der klassischen arabischen Dichtung.* 2 vols. Darmstadt 1987–1988: II p. 74) and RENATE JACOBI (Time and reality in *nasīb* and *ghazal*. In: *JAL* 16 (1985): p. 17). Consequently, one can argue that ENDERWITZ' assumption that al-ʿAbbās, in his chaste love poems, is "die Liebe in eigener Person" (p. 65) represents the consensus within the field of Arabic studies.

The function of a distinction is to clearify things. But the distinction between historical person and *persona* produces ambivalence. ENDERWITZ relates al-ʿAbbās's biography to the two male roles *fatā* and *ẓarīf*: "Al-ʿAbbās stellt den Übergang dar zwischen jenen Dichtern, die Anspruch auf eine authentische Liebe zu einer anderen Person erheben, und den *ẓurafā'*, die nurmehr die Liebe lieben" (p. 97). Afterwards, she uses the roles as the frame of reference to interpret al-ʿAbbās's poems as the expression of his view on these roles: "al-ʿAbbās zeigt sich in seiner Liebesdichtung nicht nur als führender Vertreter des *ẓarf*, sondern er steht als Liebesdichter auch in der Tradition des Ġazal. Zwischen dem tatsächlichen Verständnis des *ẓarf* als Modell des Benehmens, in dem die Liebe zur Pose wird, und dem literarischen Interesse der *ẓurafā'* an der Liebe als Macht, die Gewalt über die ganze Person gewinnt, entfaltet er eine Liebe, in deren Zentrum die *futūwa*-Tugenden des Dienstes, der Treue und der Demut stehen" (p. 64). Since ENDERWITZ construes the poet's biography from the *aḫbār* transmitted in *ṭabaqāt* and *adab*-anthologies on the one hand and his poems on the other hand, the poems are used first to construct a biography and the biography is then used to analyze the poems.

With regard to the relationship between the poet's biography and his poetry it is important to keep in mind that al-ʿAbbās's œuvre includes nothing of the more racy or more spicy stuff; a purity which, by the way, did not please a literary critic like Andras Hamori (Love poetry *(ghazal)*, in: JULIA ASHTIANY (ed.), *ʿAbbasid belles-lettres*. Cambridge 1990: p. 207). Thus, ENDERWITZ can take the more traditional stance that poems are only the direct expression of their authors' feelings and emotions if the love described is not considered coarse, obscene, or vulgar – of course from the point of view of modern western orientalists. This distinction between the morally suitable and unsuitable poems is called into question by historians, such as FRANZ ROSENTHAL (Fiction and reality. Sources for the role of sex in medieval Muslim society, in: AFAF LUTFI AL-SAYYID-MARSOT (ed.), *Society and the sexes in medieval Islam.* Malibu, CA 1979; p. 11f) and JULIE MEISAMI (Arabic mujun poetry. The literary dimension, in: FREDERICK DE JONG (ed.), *Verse and the fair sex. Studies in Arabic poetry and the representation of women in Arabic literature.* Utrecht 1993: p. 15f and 24). MEISAMI and ROSENTHAL acknowledge that different forms of love poetry besides *ġazal* contained sexually explicit jest *(muǧūn)* or outspoken obscenity *(suḫf)*. Like ENDERWITZ they relate *muǧūn* and *suḫf* to their social and political contexts of production. But they stress that the lyrical ego in a poem and the poem's author are not identical. Their main argument is that poets well-known for *muǧūn* or *suḫf* – for example al-ʿAbbās's famous contemporary Abū Nuwās (died 814 or 815) – also wrote excellent poetry which had neither *muǧūn* or *suḫf*. They insist on taking into account the poets' sophisticated

audience which was well-versed in the poetic literary traditions of the time and hence could understand *muyūn* or *suḫf* as parodies and satires of the renowned literary genre *ġazal*.

Because of the thematic uniformity of al-ʿAbbās's *dīwān* ENDERWITZ can presume an essentialist politics of love. She provides a phenomenological description of different kinds of love, for instance *amour courtois, al-ḥubb al-ʿUḏrī*, or *muğūn*. But she does not provide an answer to the question of what ist love. According to her phenomenology, the unquestioned standard is that men write poems about their love for women, although after the end of the eighth century women did not even account for the majority of the beloveds in *ġazal* (WAGNER, *op. cit.*: II p. 85). Men writing poems about their love for men or boys *(muḏakkarāt)* is classified as deviant and hence *muğūn* (p. 22), while there seems to be no cases of women writing poems about their love for men or women. ENDERWITZ sees only heterosexual desire transformed when she sketches the later development of the literary genre: Love poems by a man addressed to a man or a boy are desexualized as *"Freundschaftsgedichte"* (p. 224), while love poems about the mystical love of God transcend human love into divine love *(ibid.)*. Heterosexual love is a given, an anthropological constant defined through the object choice of the other, the different gender. The development of *ġazal* in the direction of *muḏakkarāt* and mystical poetry, however, indicates that the positions of lover and beloved were not bound to gender and that love was not qualified by the choice of object, that is, whether it was love for women, love for men, love for God, or even love for wine in the case of the drinking songs *(ḫamrīyāt)*. Love can be a discursively constructed concept in which the state of being in love is defined by the character of the act, for example the lover's stare at the beloved or the beloved's betrayal of the lover (IBN ḤAZM, *Tauq al-ḥamāma*. Ed. by Ḥ. K. AL-ṢURAIFĪ and I. AL-ABYĀRĪ. Cairo 1964: p. 12 – "al-nāẓir lā yaṭrifu yatanaqqalu bi-tanaqqul al-maḥbūb" and p. 83 – "wuğūd al-ġadr fī al-maḥbūb"). MICHEL FOUCAULT's thesis that sexuality is a historical construct *(The history of sexuality.* Vol. 1. New York 1990: p. 43), works also for medieval Arabo-Islamic society, if the term sexuality is replaced by love.

At this point feminism meets cultural anthropology. If for ENDERWITZ love itself is always the same and if it is only its heterosexual essence which is expressed in different ways throughout history, the Arabist theory provides an explanation for the seemingly obvious: she regards the reversal of "die Realität des Geschlechterverhältnisses" (p. 3) as the common feature of *ġazal*, Troubadour lyric, and *Minnesang*. Consequently, ENDERWITZ does not discuss the topics which constitute the battlefield of the Arabist theory: the formal literary elements of Arabic scansion, stanzaic poetry, and *ḫarğas*. Nor does she address the actual historical process of transmission of poems from eighth century Baghdad to eleventh century Provence. Moreover, ENDERWITZ does not present the arguments against the Arabist theory, she only complains: "Die Frage nach einer möglicherweise ähnlichen Funktion der Dichtung wurde daher gar nicht erst gestellt" (p. 2).

ENDERWITZ deploys a passage from the *Murūğ al-ḏahab* by al-Masʿūdī (died 956 or 957) in order to argue that al-ʿAbbās's understanding of love shows similarities to the understanding of love in classical Greek philosophy (p. 64, 171, 186–188,

and 192). The passage reports a discussion about love by theologians who were assembled in the palace of the Barmakid vizier Yaḥyā b. Ḫālid. As Hārūn al-Rašīd dismissed Yaḥyā b. Ḫālid in 803, the discussion allegedly took place toward the end of al-ʿAbbās's life. This passage was analyzed by GUSTAVE VON GRUNEBAUM (Avicenna's Risāla fī'l-ʿišq and courtly love, in: *Journal of Near Eastern Studies.* 11 (1952): p. 233–238), and mentioned by WAGNER (*op. cit.*: II p. 83). Yet, ENDERWITZ refers only to VON GRUNEBAUM's article; she does not consider WAGNER's reservation about the report's implications for the influence of classical Greek philosophy on the concept of love in al-ʿAbbās's *ġazal*. She calls al-ʿAbbās rather ironically a "Prototroubadour" (p. 25 and 108) because she accepts VON GRUNEBAUM's understanding of a classical Arabo-Islamic civilization as the intermediary for transmitting the knowledge of Greek and Latin antiquity to medieval Europe (The Arab contribution to troubadour poetry, in: *Bulletin of the Iranian Institute* (New York). 6/7 (1946): p. 138–151). ENDERWITZ combines an essentialist understanding of heterosexual love with a universalist conception of classical antiquity. From this point of view, both the Arabic *ġazal* and the European literary tradition of courtly love are rooted in classical Greek philosophy. Appreciation of Arabic love poetry in the West is reduced to an unavoidable consequence of its similarity to medieval European love poetry. Since the Arabic *ġazal* is just one branch from the Graeco-Roman tree and does not even flower as beautifully as its later European branches of Troubadour lyric and *Minnesang*, it is not fully appreciated as love poetry in its own right.

ENDERWITZ uses the Arabist theory to claim the fictional reversal of gender roles as a structural similarity between Arabic *ġazal*, Troubadour lyric, and *Minnesang*. Therefore, the Arabist theory is also the basis of her approach to interpreting al-ʿAbbās's love poems through the two male roles *fatā* and *ẓarīf*. But the inherent gender inequalities within both lyrical fiction and historical reality are not an issue for ENDERWITZ. Taking into consideration that even MEISAMI's excellent article on *muǧūn (op. cit.)* does not touch upon gender questions, ENDERWITZ' position is the position of a majority within contemporary scholarship on medieval Arabic poetry. She describes and interprets the female bodies in al-ʿAbbās's *ġazal* as objects of male heterosexual desire (p. 90–102 and 133–156), although she interprets his poems as the direct depiction of the social reality. The two male roles *fatā* and *ẓarīf* serve as two different forms of practicing heterosexual love. What goes unexamined is the social reality of women, because women who were not slave girls are only present as a man's fiction for an audience consisting of men. In the strictly gender differentiated society of Baghdad (p. 43 f, compare also p. 137), homosociality between men formed the triangle of male poet, male audience, and absent female beloved.

In order to describe the absent beloved, medieval Arabic poetry of the ʿAbbāsid period offered an abundance of conventional *topoi*. ENDERWITZ experiences this wealth of poetic tradition as a neutralization of any possible individualistic trait. Consequently, she laments "daß ausgerechnet zum Äußeren der geliebten Frau den arabischen Dichtern der Abbasidenzeit so wenig Neues über die vorislamische Tradition hinaus einfällt" (p. 137). Since ENDERWITZ insists on the causal

connection between al-ʿAbbās's love life and his poetry (p. 100), the object function of the female body for the homosocial bonding of men is beyond her grasp. Due to this object function, a description of a real woman's personality is not intended by the description of a female body which provides just a mirror for the male gaze.

ENDERWITZ labels al-ʿAbbās's *ġazal* as chaste or even extremely chaste (p. 111 *et passim*), but she defines neither her criteria of chaste love nor al-ʿAbbās's. She strives to document the development of Arabic love poetry from the amatory introduction *(nasīb)* of the pre-Islamic ode *(qaṣīda)* to al-ʿAbbās's *ġazal* so that she compares his poems with those of Imruʾl-Qais (died before 550), Ǧamīl (died 701/702), or ʿUmar b. Abī Rabīʿa (died 712 or 721), to name just the most important. ENDERWITZ describes the emergence of the Arabo-Islamic civilization during the seventh and eighth centuries as the transition from a pre-Islamic nomadic culture to the refined and sophisticated life style in the medieval Islamic cities of Damascus, Baghdad, Kufa, or Basra (p. 4–6). Although ENDERWITZ considers this progress, she describes the situation of Arab women in the pre-Islamic tribal society in irritatingly positive terms. She perceives a certain balance in the love relationship between man and woman which is "eine[r] offenkundig freiwillige[n] Absprache beider Beteiligter" (p. 127) or has the character "des reziproken Verhältnisses von weiblicher Schönheit und männlicher Tatkraft" (p. 137). ENDERWITZ takes evidence from the notorious *nasīb* in Imruʾl-Qais's *Muʿallaqa*. She cites lines 13 to 19 in which the male lyrical ego boasts about having sex with pregnant or breastfeeding women who are neither has wives nor his slaves (p. 127 f). She presents this text as the historical evidence of the pre-Islamic concept of an extramarital love relationship which the married woman entered on her own free will. At this point ENDERWITZ pays a high price for her lack of focus on gender asymmetries: her conclusions are at odds with both the consensus among historians that in general the rise of Islam improved women's social and legal status (*The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World:* IV p. 323 *s. v.* "Role and status of women") and the literary tradition in the section of boast *(faḫr)* of the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda*, where the bragging about raping the victim's women is a fairly common theme.

ENDERWITZ acknowledges that in al-ʿAbbās's chaste poems "Die Beschreibung ... ist sprachliche Aneignung der Frau" (p. 137). The poet created a beloved in his own image and gave her a name. But ENDERWITZ does not ask what the gender of the poet was, although it is the process of being named by al-ʿAbbās that grants the women in his poems a historical existence: "Fauz, die Geliebte des Dichters al-ʿAbbās, ist das historische Faktum in seinem Leben, denn wie die Geliebten seiner Vorgänger wird sie direkt durch die poetischen Texte bezeugt" (p. 90). The artistic effect of al-ʿAbbās's love poetry still leaves us with the question of whether the relationship between the poet and his beloved is merely another variation of the relationship between Pygmalion and his beautiful statue.